

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a forest at night or in low light. The scene is filled with tall, thin trees and a thick mist or fog that obscures the background. In the center of the frame, a person is silhouetted against a slightly brighter area of the forest floor. The person is wearing a hooded jacket and pants, and is holding a handgun in their right hand. The overall mood is mysterious and suspenseful.

# FROM A DEAD SLEEP

A NOVEL

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## Chapter 1

Sean Coleman grunted at the mercy of an excruciating headache as he began to awake. His skull throbbed in anguish, as if it had been knotted tightly with a rope. With blurred vision behind flickering eyelids, he struggled to find clarity and discovered himself lying facedown on a bed of damp, coarse dirt. Blades of long, healthy grass, wet from morning dew, brushed against his cheek as he clumsily turned his head to the side. A roaring cough erupted from deep within his throat, contorting his face and prompting him to raise his muddied fist to his parched lips.

Fragmented events from the night before began to stumble through his mind as if a diary was being thumbed through. He remembered getting off work late and stopping by O'Rafferty's Bar for a drink. One drink turned into many, and he soon lost fifty bucks to Moses Jones in a game of eight-ball. Sean couldn't afford to lose that money. It was his lifeline, but he had beaten Moses in the past on numerous occasions and another Sean Coleman victory seemed like a sure bet. Moses must have been practicing.

That money was needed for rent—rent that was already two months overdue. His landlord's patience had been expended. He recalled the seriousness in that angry man's eyes while he threatened Sean with eviction if the amount due wasn't paid in full by the week's end. It was the story of Sean's life: always making the wrong decisions at the worst possible times.

"You stupid son of a bitch," he grunted. His voice was hoarse, barely audible above the clamor of river rapids. The words were hoarse, grating.

Birds chatted peacefully above, their song the only sound that

resonated above the loud roar of moving water whose constant echo bounced off the towering trees and large, rounded, moss-covered rocks. Fresh daylight shined through narrow openings in the thick Gamble Oak and evergreens. A ray kindled a swaying glimmer off of an empty beer bottle that lay just inches from Sean's face. His stinging, bloodshot eyes glared hypnotically at it, as if he were staring through an open campfire.

He grappled with adjusting his eyes over what felt like an eternity, but was closer to a minute's time. Finally the world focused.

Among the muggy turf and the scent of pine, his nose intercepted a lingering, recognizable, but vile stench. Through narrowed eyes, he scowled at the large clump of vomit that nested intrusively on the ground in front of the beer bottle he barely recalled carrying in his hand the night before. The sight prompted him to hastily spin over onto his broad back, away from last night's penance. A wake of pain flowed across his skull from the brisk movement. His body flattened the grass beneath him, while small, underlying stones crackled from his movement.

His fluttering eyes soon grew large when a piercing sensation pricked into his chest. His hand hustled to his front shirt pocket, and his fingers quickly clenched the thin but heavy metal object that resided there. He grabbed it and raised it to his face. He examined the blemished badge whose securing pin dangled loosely in the light breeze. His thumb smeared mud and tiny grass particles from the front, exposing a smooth glimmering shield with an etched star at the middle. Above the star, in blue engraved print, read the word "Hansen." The lower half read "Security."

A whisper of moving brush and the snap of a thin twig spun Sean's head to the side like a weathervane through a sudden wind gust. A subtle smile formed on his lips as he welcomed the unexpected company of a large jackrabbit who glared back with beady black eyes. The critter was hunched timidly between two small shrubs; its oversized ears pointing straight upward, while its nose trembled

erratically. The small animal's coat was nearly camouflaged against a dead overturned tree that lay in rot behind it. The rabbit examined him curiously, approaching within a few feet with a single lunge. Sean sneered back, engaging in a stare down with its lifeless black eyes that appeared to be silently judging him. The rabbit's eyelids clenched with an expression that could be best interpreted as a scowl if it were formed on the face of a human. After several seconds of neither giving in, Sean sighed in dismay.

His low, gravelly voice broke the stalemate. "I know," he stated in a hopeless, conceding tone.

Seemingly satisfied with the large man's confessional, the furry creature quickly lurched to the side and scurried off under brush and around trees. It soon disappeared from sight.

"I know," Sean repeated before his eyes slowly dropped to the ground.

He lay there in an almost relaxed state, tracing the contours of the shield with his eyes while using his fingernails to scrape the remaining filth from each and every groove. To Sean, it was a badge of honor . . . a dwindling reminder that he had a responsibility, a noble purpose in life, even though life hadn't turned out the way he'd imagined it. He craned his head forward; the action of which formed a double chin that displayed a day's stubble which looked prematurely gray for a man of thirty-seven years of age. He quickly used both hands to reattach the shield to the front of his pocket. He fiddled with it until he was certain it hung symmetrically.

From his reclined position, he couldn't help but notice his exposed stomach peeking out from under his untucked, gray button-up shirt. It crested over the top of his belt, no longer resembling the defined row of abdominal muscles of which he had once been very proud. His uniformed pants, accented with black pinstripes, were severely wrinkled and stained by grass, mud, and vomit. The tips of his brown, worn-out cowboy boots pointed upward toward the morning sky.

A straining groan slid from between his large, yellowing teeth as he crunched his body up into a sitting position. With his broad shoulders, he looked like a large lonesome tree stump, indigenous to the wilderness that surrounded him. He felt dampness on his back and butt, immediately accompanied by a brief chill going through his body that was now being exposed to the open breeze. The night's events flooded back to him. Wallowing in the familiar misery of his loss and convincing himself that there was no redemption for his mistake, the barrier of self-restraint crumbled down around him and he had found himself at the bar ordering a much-needed drink at O'Rafferty's. It was the first of many.

He also remembered Ted O'Rafferty himself limping outside into the parking lot after him and all those drinks and snatching his car keys away.

"You ain't driving anywhere tonight, Coleman!" the old man had lectured as he pressed the tip of his crooked wooden walking cane into Sean's chest.

Sean recalled he'd caused the kind of scene that had become expected of him over the years, but stubborn Ted would have none of it. The old man had too much respect for Sean's uncle to let his drunken nephew climb into his car and drive off. Hobbling back up the steps toward the front doors, Ted had screamed in his grainy, frail voice, "You can sleep out here in your car, but you ain't driving anywhere tonight!"

Now lying among the cool grass, Sean wondered why he hadn't taken Ted's advice rather than attempting to walk home. The last thing he remembered was stumbling his way down the roadside and marveling at the wicked lightning storm that had illuminated the night sky to the north.

"Yeah, this is much better . . ." he muttered wryly.

His legs burned when he reached for his knees, attempting to stretch out his wide back as his shoulders lunged forward. His hand went to the back of his head, where his teeth-manicured fingernails

scratched a constantly irritated area at the base of his skull. A quarter-sized patch of hairless skin resided there, rubbed raw. The blemish was surrounded by an otherwise decently kept, short flat-top crew cut.

He noticed a collection of small dusty pebbles stuck to the bottom of his elbow. The same section of skin served as home to fresh scratches and scrapes. As he glanced up at the dirt road above the ditch he was nested in, he noticed his black plastic hair comb snagged on the thin limb of a small straggly bush. It was about halfway up the hill. Above and below the bush lay a wide vertical path of flattened and broken vegetation. Sean concluded that he had fallen down from the road above before rolling down the gradual embankment. He remembered none of it, but strangely enough enjoyed a touch of satisfaction at being able to reenact the scene in his mind based on the clues before him.

“Forensics . . .” he whispered. “They’re the only true identifier to the mystery of an untold past.” He grinned as he repeated the profound statement, which he remembered hearing William Petersen iterate from a recent episode of *CSI*.

With County Road 2 and Meyers Bridge residing so closely above, it was a wonder no early morning drivers had seen him lying down in that ditch. Maybe they did and just didn’t care. Maybe the locals had all figured out by now that it was best not to ever engage Sean Coleman.

With his finger carefully scraping yellow crust from his eye, he raised himself up to one knee, yawning while peering out from behind the thin wispy grass that surrounded him. His gaze traced the tops of the low mountain range that sprawled familiarly along the northern horizon. He then glanced over his shoulder and along the road leading up the old wooden bridge—the same one he drove back and forth across most days.

That was when forced clarity suddenly grabbed Sean’s attention, as if he had been shaken awake. His eyes focused in surprise as he

beheld an odd site—the dark figure of a man, clad in a long trench coat, standing directly at the center of the bridge. Sean hadn't heard him approach. The black outfit cloaking the stranger's body couldn't have been any more misplaced; a foreign sight to the rural area far outside of any large cities. The man was leaning forward, peering blankly out in the direction of the river's flow. His knees pressed against the rusted steel guardrail that traveled along the edge of the bridge. It was clear that he hadn't spotted Sean in the ditch.

The man was average in height with bright blonde, well-kept hair that was short at the sides and back, and not much longer on top. His dark pants and shoes matched his trench coat.

The bags under Sean's eyes tightened and his mouth drooped open as he curiously examined the stranger. He noticed the man's chest was visibly expanding and contracting with large breaths. He watched him lean forward with his hands in his pockets, peering aimlessly down at the water below. His leather dress shoes, despite being scuffed and muddied, shined under a gap of sunlight penetrating through the trees.

Even from the distance, Sean could smell money. He fancied the man as a business executive. A big-shot city slicker. The stranger was thin but athletic, with a runner's build. He was clean shaven and appeared to have quite noticeable wide, red marks under his dark eyes, as if he normally wore glasses. Sean guessed they had to be large glasses, because the streaks traced well down to his cheek bones.

Without warning, the man's head quickly spun to the side.

Sean, out of pure instinct, ducked down low to keep from being seen. The long grass helped conceal him from view.

The man intently investigated the stretch of road to the west and then spun to the other side to check out the east.

Sean felt a little silly for hiding; he wasn't sure there was a point in it. He was a large and strong man who had little fear, a trait that often served as a detriment. But it was the pure fascination he was developing with the gentleman's foreign nature that kept Sean



from revealing himself. As if observing a deer in the forest, he felt compelled to stay still and silent, to keep from startling the man.

The stranger on the bridge peered back and forth several more times in a paranoid fashion. This was all the more fascinating to Sean, whose large frame sunk lower onto his hands and knees.

As if he was suddenly being timed, the man quickly regained his composure and raised his hands from his pockets. A shiny gold wristwatch, now visible, danced in the sun, sending a beam of light directly into Sean's eyes.

Sean was forced to squint but kept his sight trained on the stranger's odd behavior. Once the glimmer vanished, Sean's face twisted in puzzlement. He now had clear sight of the man's hands.

His left hand was wrapped in what looked to be a gauze bandage or maybe a towel. The bandage wasn't clean; a crimson blemish stained the area over his palm.

"What the hell?" Sean whispered under his breath, struggling to decipher the display.

The man's head snapped quickly from side to side again before he lifted his left leg over the guardrail and stepped onto the narrow outer edge of the wood planking. His other leg followed. He was now in a sitting position, nested across the railing with his knees facing out and his feet dangling in the empty air.

Sean's nostrils flared as his eyes held a firm squint. Every now and then he had seen one of the locals perched in a similar position on that same bridge with a fishing pole. However, that was usually in the spring or fall when the water was moving slower—not this time of year. Either way, it was clear that the man was not a fisherman. A hint of concern flashed through Sean's mind; he was familiar with the merciless power of the river. If the man wasn't careful, he'd slip and fall in, and not likely make it back out.

He noticed the man's lips moving, deliberately, as if he were talking to himself. Whatever he said could not be heard over the rush of water pounding below him. The stranger's hand then crept



into the side pocket of his trench coat. There resided a small bulge that Sean hadn't previously noticed.

As he arched his neck up a little in an attempt to analyze what would emerge, Sean's eyelids quickly opened to their widest extent. To his shock, a black handgun rose from the pouch.

"Jesus," Sean muttered softly, lowering back to his hands and knees. His heart began pounding.

The pistol appeared to be a Glock, but the barrel looked a little too long. Sean knew a little something about guns. A thousand thoughts raced through his mind, like lightning bugs bouncing off the inside of a glass jar. Upon closer examination of the pistol, he realized that it wasn't the barrel that made it appear disproportionately long; there was a silencer attached. He had never actually seen a silencer in his lifetime, but it looked just like they did on television and in magazines.

Sean's mind was cloudy, and the hangover wasn't helping his focus. He strained to form a sensible explanation. Then, a thought suddenly occurred to him.

Could this guy be a hit man? Had this lone stranger just *taken someone out*, and was he now about to dispose of the evidence?

Sean understood the ridiculousness of the notion but began to make a case for it in his mind. It would explain the way he was dressed and the style of the gun . . . or so Sean deemed reasonable. If he was a professional, however, why was he taking so long and acting so peculiar? And where was his car? How did he get there? None of it made sense. Sean felt the best course of action was to stay put and let the show play out.

The man's shoulders deflated. He sighed before his arm whipped behind his body where his fingers searched through his back pants pocket. Shifting his hips and tugging at his arm, the extended effort allowed him to remove a black leather wallet. With the flick of his wrist, he flipped open the sides of the trifold, and gazed at whatever was inside.

Sean wondered if he was looking at a picture.

The man set his gun down sideways on a wooden post beside him, one of many of that supported the guardrail.

The stranger's eyes drooped from what, up until then, had been direct intent. They now read a much less organized tale.

It was the same expression Sean himself had witnessed so many times—when looking in the mirror. Sorrow. Regret.

*A hit-man with a conscience?* he wondered.

The man's shoulders dropped lower, and he took another deep breath. After glancing back out along the river's path, he suddenly built up enough motivation to stand up straight. The bottom of his long trench coat spilled back to his ankles. He used his right hand to hang onto the guardrail, keeping himself balanced on the edge of the old wooden planking. The injured hand quickly shoved the wallet back into his pocket. It went in much easier than it came out, though the man's face seemed to twist in pain at the movement. He leaned to his side to retrieve the pistol.

Sean wondered why the man was making no immediate attempt to climb back over the railing to safety.

Instead, the stranger remained in an upright position balancing his heels along the edge of the bridge while his calves rested against the guardrail. Then, he held the butt of the gun to his chest with both hands.

"Hey . . ." Sean instinctively said to himself in a whisper before quickly raising up to his knees. Remaining hidden no longer felt important.

His focus shifted back and forth from the man's desperate eyes to the gun he held in front of his body in an awkward grip. It had suddenly become apparent that the series of actions unfolding before Sean were concluding something very different than what he'd originally thought.

The stranger shuffled the gun in his noticeably trembling hands before holding it in a conventional fashion with his right. He steadily

raised his arm back over his shoulder and drew the gun awkwardly to the back side of his head, using his other hand to direct the barrel to the base of his skull.

The oddity and mystery of what he was witnessing was no longer Sean's concern. No more questions. No more observation. He was certain the man was about to take his own life, and he wasn't going to sit by and let it happen.

"Hey!" Sean heard himself call out in a voice loud and scary enough to gain the attention of anyone . . . unless that person was standing above the loud crashing sound of roaring water rapids.

The man didn't flinch or show any indication that he had heard Sean's call. He continued to hold the barrel in place with the metal tip resting against the back of his skull.

Sean's teeth clenched as he quickly scrambled up the short hill and onto the dirt road. His footing slid on the damp grass, but his persistence gave him the traction he needed.

"Hey!" he screamed out again, projecting his voice even louder than the first time.

There was still no reaction from the man who stood about forty yards away. The motion of his arms had come to a grizzly halt. His limbs contorted back behind his body with the barrel of the gun glued to its intended target.

"Stop!" Sean roared, waving his arms frantically back and forth above his head as if he were directing a grounded plane. He prayed his wild movements would catch the man's peripheral vision, but they received no response.

Sean engaged in an all-out sprint, something he hadn't done much of since his high school football days. The loud modulation of crackling gravel was soon replaced by the sharp groaning of wooden boards once he broke the plain of the bridge. Air pressed heavily from his nose and mouth. With a grueling red face, his chest thrust forward with each stride. Despite the great amount of effort he was

extending, he felt as if he were running underwater in a dream. His body couldn't move as fast as his mind.

About twenty yards away now.

Sean's jaw lifted as he prepared to deliver another verbal plea, but before a syllable could leave his mouth, his eyes glared in horror at the image of the man purposely letting his body fall forward off the bridge. Sean's mind interpreted the scene in slow motion. Regardless of how fast his legs were pumping, there was no way of reaching the stranger in time. This curtain of helplessness was quickly replaced by numbing shock when a deep-red spray jetted through the air, just above where the stranger's body dropped from visibility. After hovering for a second, the red mist quickly dispersed into the breeze.

There was no sound of a gunshot. The silencer had done its job.

With a coarse gasp and a wrenching cramp in his stomach, Sean immediately altered his direction toward the railing at his side. He dropped to his knees and craned his neck over the edge, just in time to see the fluttering trench coat drop into the swirling water below with a loud splash.

Water flew high into the air, but the jetting rapids quickly replaced all disruption of the river's flow. The body disappeared into the violent churning; swallowed whole. All that was left was a burning smell and a red, discolored stream of water that dissolved into whiteness as it was quickly carried downstream.

Sean's chest heaved in and out as he struggled for breath. He felt as if he himself was drowning. The realization of what he had just witnessed quickly sank into the depths of his stomach.